

VIDUARA

A JOURNAL OF THE PRESS INSTITUTE OF INDIA

ISSN 0042-5303

Live and let live, yes... but in our own style!



Indians routinely, habitually, flout social norms, looking only at their own convenience or gain, in complete disregard of how it affects the country or society as a whole. **Alok Srivastava** takes a look at several ways how this is done

The term 'anti-social' is very often used to label any act which is against society or social norms. Anti-social behaviours are actions that harm or lack consideration for the wellbeing of others. In an Indian context, some antisocial behaviours are actually facilitated by officialdom, while others are practised at the level of the family or individual.

A recent decision of the NCT (Delhi) Government can be considered an illustration of the former category. The government decided to follow the trend set by some other governments and either completely or partially waived the water consumption dues of Delhi households. How does this decision look from the point of view of consumers who had been diligently paying their bills, as against those who had defaulted, running up huge dues, and possibly even earning interest on the money not paid out?

Did the step not convey the message that if you don't clear your dues, whether consumer bills or bank loans, expecting that that one day the amount would be waived, you are smarter than those who dutifully pay up on time? The question then arises, is willfully defaulting an antisocial act?

India, a country of nearly 1.3 billion already, has been seeing a population explosion in spite of a strong campaign for family planning and even some tough action. This situation is an example of society-wide anti-social behaviour. As a country, we tend to ignore the

family planning message, choosing instead to put the onus of the increasing size of our families on the Almighty – 'by the Grace of God', we say. We take no cognizance of the fact that we're not contributing to the country or society as much in proportion to the resources we extract due to our expanding families. Is such an attitude beneficial to society?

The 'anti-social' tag is not limited to the illiterate or less-informed citizens of India. Even the 'educated' and affluent are guilty of such behaviour. Those who own upmarket cars don't see anything wrong in parking them on the roadside instead of within their own compounds. They encroach on pavement space by setting out decorative plants and so on, forcing pedestrians on to the busy roads. Such anti-social activity adds to their living space, at no extra cost!

Often, in affluent residential areas, rules are bent to carry out construction without requisite approval, cutting off light and air and posing safety risks to nearby buildings. The same principle is seen in commercial spaces and marketplaces, where shopkeepers stake claim to pavements to extend their display space, and pick up fights with those who object. This is often done in collusion with political parties keen to appease their vote bank, and any efforts to rein in such behaviour is promptly met with protests and accusations of 'grave injustice'.

The concept of queueing up for one's turn is alien to Indians.

Whether it is to board a metro train or disembark from a plane, everyone is in a hurry, and it's a matter of first-come-first-served. On flights, many regular flyers put their mobile phones on, ignoring repeated requests from airline crew members not to do so, behaving as though the world will collapse if they are inaccessible for tow-four hours.

On Delhi metro trains, commuters who don't find seats settle down on the floor of the trains, disregarding the inconvenience to those who have to move through the carriage. At shop billing counters, it is common to find people trying to squeeze into the space you may have politely left between you and the customer in front. If they can't wriggle in, they might use their superior height to attract the billing clerk's attention and be served out of turn. Most shopkeepers oblige such persons, validating the anti-social behaviour.

One of the main criticisms against demonetisation is that it badly affected the informal sector, which provides jobs to 80 per cent of the workforce in India, because employers had to deposit all cash in banks and could not withdraw it to make payments. But wasn't the underlying reason for not making digital payments the fact that the payments that were due were not in accordance with the wage norms prescribed by the government?

Takke GST as another example. Its objective is to get rid of all unofficial businesses and transactions.



Then why opposition to its introduction? The intention, then, is to be antisocial by avoiding tax or paying employees less than the legal wage rates, isn't it?

It is hard to believe that anyone would have starved to death due to lack of money to purchase food items during the demonetisation period. But assuming this happened, isn't it a poor reflection on the community itself? Have Indians become so insensitve that they allow people to starve to death because they don't have ready cash to buy food? What were the many temples, mosques, gurudwaras and churches, which regularly organise feasts on religious occasions, doing at the time?

As a society, we have the habit of throwing down water bottles and snack packets the moment they are empty, wherever we may be at that point in time – it could be a train, a bus, or a road. We do not bother to look for a trash can, we just fling away the sachet or bottle.

Indians think nothing of driving on the wrong side of the road and against the legitimate direction of traffic to get out of a traffic jam or simply to reach their destination faster. We regularly jump traffic signals as we want to remain ahead of others. We overtake from the wrong side, unconcerned about the effect this has on fellow drivers. If a minor collision takes place in the thick of traffic, we are willing to

drop everything to prove that the other party was at fault.

If these aren't examples of anti-social behaviour, what is?

Look around. I'm sure you'll find many more examples of anti-social people carrying on with their patterns of life with no sign of remorse or guilt. After all, we Indians believe in the motto 'live and let others live', but with a caveat – in our style! ■

(The writer is director, CMS Social, Centre for Media Studies, a multi-disciplinary social research and advocacy organization in Delhi.)